

Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Leadership: A Systematic Review of Emerging Theoretical Perspectives

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Abstract

This study aimed to systematically explore emerging theoretical perspectives on the future of leadership in AI-enabled organizations through the lived interpretations of experts involved in digital transformation, organizational leadership, and artificial intelligence implementation. The study adopted a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews with 22 experts from Tehran, including senior managers, AI project leaders, digital transformation consultants, organizational development specialists, and academic researchers. Participants were selected purposively according to their direct experience with AI-enabled organizational change, leadership development, or strategic technology adoption. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, which occurred after the nineteenth interview and was confirmed through three additional interviews. Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis in NVivo software. Open coding, axial categorization, constant comparison, memo-writing, and peer review were used to enhance analytical rigor. The analysis generated five main categories: human-AI collaborative decision-making, algorithmic authority and leadership accountability, ethical and relational leadership in AI-mediated organizations, adaptive learning and AI literacy, and distributed leadership through hybrid intelligence systems. Participants emphasized that AI is not merely a managerial tool but a structural force that reshapes decision rights, influence patterns, accountability mechanisms, and the symbolic meaning of leadership. The findings suggest that future leadership will depend less on unilateral human judgment and more on the ability to interpret, govern, humanize, and strategically integrate algorithmic intelligence. The study concludes that AI-driven leadership should be conceptualized as a hybrid sociotechnical capability in which human leaders remain responsible for meaning-making, ethical judgment, trust formation, and strategic direction, while AI systems enhance analytical speed, pattern recognition, prediction, and operational coordination.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence; future of leadership; AI-powered leadership; digital leadership; human-AI collaboration; qualitative study; Tehran

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1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence has moved from being a specialized technological instrument to becoming a central organizing force in contemporary organizations. Earlier debates on digital transformation primarily emphasized the automation of operational processes, the digitization of communication, and the emergence of virtual forms of organizing. However, the current wave of artificial intelligence has entered domains historically associated with managerial judgment, strategic analysis, employee monitoring, decision support, coordination, and even aspects of influence and motivation. This shift has direct implications for leadership theory because leadership has traditionally been conceptualized as a human, relational, value-laden, and socially embedded process. As AI systems increasingly support or partially perform tasks related to decision-making, evaluation, prediction, communication, and coordination, scholars must reconsider whether conventional theories of leadership are sufficient for explaining leadership in organizations where human and machine intelligence interact continuously.



Classical leadership theories were developed in organizational contexts where authority, influence, vision, and interpersonal relationships were understood as fundamentally human phenomena. Transformational leadership theory emphasized the capacity of leaders to inspire followers, articulate a compelling vision, stimulate intellectual development, and address individual needs (Bass, 1985; Bass & Riggio, 2006). Servant leadership emphasized ethical stewardship, follower development, empathy, and moral responsibility (Greenleaf, 1977). Authentic leadership focused on self-awareness, relational transparency, internalized moral perspective, and balanced processing (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Complexity leadership theory shifted attention from individual heroic leaders to adaptive interactions within complex systems, arguing that leadership emerges through networks, learning, and dynamic interaction (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Although these frameworks remain important, AI challenges their assumptions by introducing nonhuman agents into decision processes, feedback systems, and organizational coordination mechanisms.

The first major theoretical transition occurred with the development of e-leadership and digital leadership. E-leadership research examined how information and communication technologies transformed leadership source, transmission, and interaction patterns (Avolio et al., 2014). Digital leadership extended this discussion by emphasizing strategic agility, technological competence, virtual collaboration, and the ability to lead organizational transformation through digital infrastructures. Yet AI differs from earlier digital technologies because it does not simply transmit information or enable remote interaction; it can generate recommendations, classify behavior, predict performance, automate managerial routines, and shape what leaders and employees perceive as relevant. In this sense, AI is not only a channel of leadership but also a participant in the leadership process. Van Quaquebeke and Gerpott (2023) argue that AI may increasingly move from supporting leaders to substituting for some task-oriented, relational, and change-oriented leadership functions.

A central theoretical issue concerns the relationship between automation and augmentation. Raisch and Krakowski (2021) describe this as the automation–augmentation paradox: AI can replace human tasks while simultaneously expanding the scope and quality of human decision-making. In leadership, this paradox is especially significant because leaders may use AI to improve strategic analysis, reduce cognitive overload, detect environmental patterns, and personalize employee support, while also risking dependency, deskilling, opacity, and loss of moral responsibility. AI can augment leadership when leaders retain reflective judgment, contextual interpretation, and ethical accountability. It can undermine leadership when algorithmic outputs are treated as neutral, inevitable, or superior to human deliberation. Thus, the future of leadership is not defined by whether AI replaces or supports leaders, but by how organizations configure the boundary between human judgment and algorithmic recommendation.

AI also transforms organizational decision-making structures. Shrestha et al. (2019) argue that AI-based decision systems differ from human decision-making in terms of speed, scale, replicability, interpretability, and the size of the alternative set that can be processed. These differences create new organizational arrangements, including human-to-AI delegation, AI-to-human sequential decision-making, and aggregated human–AI decision-making. For leadership theory, this means that decision authority is no longer located only in individuals, teams, or hierarchical positions. Authority becomes distributed across people, data infrastructures, algorithms, dashboards, and governance rules. Leaders must therefore develop the capacity to understand when AI recommendations should be followed, questioned, contextualized, or overridden.

The emergence of algorithmic management further complicates leadership theory. Algorithmic management refers to the use of algorithms and AI-enabled systems to allocate tasks, monitor performance, evaluate workers, and enforce organizational control. Kellogg et al. (2020) show that algorithms can create new forms of contested control by structuring visibility, restricting discretion, and intensifying surveillance. Jarrahi et al. (2021) similarly argue that algorithmic management changes work relationships by embedding managerial control into technical systems. From a leadership perspective, this development raises difficult questions about accountability, fairness, employee autonomy, and trust. When employees receive feedback, evaluation, or instructions through AI systems, they may experience leadership not as interpersonal guidance but as impersonal algorithmic authority. Therefore, future leadership theory must explain how legitimacy, trust, resistance, and commitment are formed in AI-mediated authority systems.

Another important issue is opacity. AI systems often operate through complex models that are not fully interpretable to users. Faraj et al. (2018) describe learning algorithms as organizational forces characterized by black-boxed performance, comprehensive digitization, anticipatory quantification, and hidden politics. Lebovitz et al. (2022) show that professionals using AI for critical judgments must decide whether to engage with, ignore, or interrogate algorithmic outputs. These insights are highly relevant for leadership because leaders are increasingly expected to make consequential decisions based on systems they may not fully understand. This creates a new leadership responsibility: algorithmic sensemaking. Leaders must not only interpret markets, people, and strategies; they must also interpret the assumptions, limitations, and organizational consequences of AI systems.

Recent systematic reviews confirm that AI-powered leadership has become an emerging but fragmented research domain. Aziz et al. (2025) identify definitional ambiguity, ethical dilemmas, implementation challenges, and human–AI interaction problems as central themes in AI-powered leadership research. Bevilacqua et al. (2025) show that the literature on AI and top managers clusters around AI-driven leadership skills, factors influencing AI adoption, and the strategic use of AI. Hossain et al. (2025) argue that leaders in AI-driven organizations require technical, adaptive, and transformational capabilities in order to lead responsibly. These studies demonstrate that the field is moving beyond general discussion of technology adoption toward a deeper theoretical concern with how leadership itself is reconstructed in AI-intensive organizational environments.

Despite this growing body of research, several gaps remain. First, much of the literature is conceptual or review-based, while fewer studies examine how experts and practitioners interpret the transformation of leadership in concrete organizational settings. Second, existing studies often focus on Western organizational contexts, leaving limited knowledge about how leaders in developing or transitional economies understand AI-driven leadership. Third, there is still insufficient integration between leadership theory, AI governance, organizational decision-making, and ethical responsibility. Fourth, the field needs qualitative work that captures the meanings, tensions, fears, and expectations attached to AI-enabled leadership. These gaps are important because AI implementation is not merely a technical process; it is also a social, cultural, and interpretive process shaped by leaders' assumptions, organizational readiness, trust relations, and institutional constraints.

The Iranian organizational context provides a valuable setting for examining these issues. Tehran contains a concentration of technology firms, knowledge-based companies, universities, financial institutions, public-sector organizations, and consulting firms involved in digital transformation. Leaders in this environment face both global pressures to adopt AI and local constraints related to infrastructure, regulation, human capital,

organizational culture, and institutional uncertainty. Studying expert perspectives in Tehran can therefore contribute to the international literature by showing how AI-driven leadership is interpreted in a context where organizations are simultaneously exposed to advanced technological discourse and practical implementation barriers.

Accordingly, the present study explores emerging theoretical perspectives on artificial intelligence and the future of leadership through a qualitative interview-based design. Rather than treating AI as a neutral managerial tool, the study examines AI as a sociotechnical force that reshapes leadership roles, decision authority, ethical responsibility, organizational trust, and adaptive learning. By analyzing the perspectives of experts from Tehran, the study aims to develop a systematic conceptual synthesis of how leadership may evolve in AI-enabled organizations. The aim of this study was to explore emerging theoretical perspectives on the future of leadership in AI-enabled organizations through semi-structured interviews with experts from Tehran.

2. Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative research design to explore emerging theoretical perspectives on artificial intelligence and the future of leadership. The qualitative design was appropriate because the study aimed to understand expert interpretations, meanings, and conceptual patterns rather than measure predetermined variables. The research followed an interpretive approach, assuming that leadership in AI-enabled organizations is socially constructed through organizational experiences, technological expectations, professional judgments, and ethical concerns. Although the title refers to a systematic review of theoretical perspectives, the methodological orientation of the study was a systematic qualitative synthesis derived from expert interviews rather than a documentary systematic literature review.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling from Tehran. Inclusion criteria were: at least five years of professional or academic experience in leadership, organizational development, AI implementation, digital transformation, strategic management, or human resource management; direct familiarity with AI-enabled organizational change; and willingness to participate in a recorded semi-structured interview. The final sample consisted of 22 participants. The participants included 7 senior organizational managers, 5 AI or data-driven project leaders, 4 digital transformation consultants, 3 human resource or organizational development managers, and 3 university faculty members or researchers in management and technology. The sample size was determined by theoretical saturation. Saturation was reached after the nineteenth interview, when no substantially new codes or categories emerged, and three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability of the categories.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was designed to elicit participants' views on how AI is changing leadership roles, decision-making processes, managerial authority, employee relations, ethical responsibility, and future leadership competencies. The main interview questions included: How do you think AI is changing the meaning of leadership? Which leadership tasks can be supported or transformed by AI? What risks emerge when leaders rely on AI systems? What competencies will future leaders need in AI-enabled organizations? How should accountability be defined when decisions are shaped by both humans and algorithms? Follow-up questions were used to clarify meanings, obtain examples, and explore contradictions in participants' responses. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were conducted in

person or online depending on participant availability. All interviews were recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis with the support of NVivo software. The analysis proceeded in several stages. First, transcripts were read repeatedly to obtain a holistic understanding of the data. Second, open coding was conducted to identify meaningful units related to AI, leadership, decision-making, ethics, accountability, trust, learning, and organizational change. Third, conceptually related codes were grouped into subcategories through axial coding. Fourth, main categories were developed by comparing codes across interviews and refining the conceptual relationships among categories. Constant comparison was used throughout the analysis to identify similarities, differences, and emerging patterns. Analytical memos were written to document coding decisions, category development, and theoretical insights. To enhance trustworthiness, the study used peer review of coding, member checking with selected participants, prolonged engagement with transcripts, and an audit trail of analytical decisions.

3. Findings and Results

The demographic profile of the participants showed that the study included a professionally diverse group of experts from Tehran. Of the 22 participants, 14 were male and 8 were female. In terms of occupational role, 7 participants were senior organizational managers, 5 were AI or data-driven project leaders, 4 were digital transformation consultants, 3 were human resource or organizational development managers, and 3 were university faculty members or researchers. Regarding education, 8 participants held doctoral degrees, 12 held master's degrees, and 2 held bachelor's degrees. Participants' ages ranged from 31 to 58 years. In terms of organizational sector, 6 participants worked in technology-based firms, 5 in financial or banking organizations, 4 in consulting companies, 3 in universities, 2 in public-sector organizations, and 2 in large private industrial firms. Professional experience ranged from 6 to 27 years.

The first main category was **human–AI collaborative decision-making**. Participants repeatedly emphasized that AI is transforming leadership by expanding the analytical capacity of leaders while also changing the meaning of managerial judgment. AI was described as useful for environmental scanning, scenario analysis, employee analytics, risk detection, and rapid processing of large datasets. However, participants did not view AI as a replacement for human judgment. Instead, they described future leadership as a collaborative decision system in which AI provides pattern recognition and probabilistic recommendations, while leaders remain responsible for interpretation, prioritization, and contextual judgment. One participant stated, “AI can show the leader what is hidden in the data, but it cannot understand the politics, emotions, and history behind a decision” (P6). Another participant noted, “The future leader is not the person who ignores AI or blindly follows it; the future leader is the person who knows how to negotiate with AI outputs” (P14). This category suggests that leadership is shifting from individual decision authority toward hybrid decision orchestration.

The second main category was **algorithmic authority and leadership accountability**. Participants argued that AI systems increasingly influence decisions that were previously made by managers, including recruitment, performance evaluation, task allocation, customer prioritization, and risk assessment. This creates ambiguity about who is accountable when AI-supported decisions produce harmful or unfair outcomes. Several participants described algorithmic authority as a hidden form of power because employees may comply with recommendations

simply because they appear technical, objective, or data-based. One participant explained, “When a manager says no, employees can ask why; when the system says no, people often think there is no one to question” (P3). Another participant observed, “The danger is not that AI becomes powerful; the danger is that leaders use AI to escape responsibility” (P18). This category shows that future leadership theory must include governance, transparency, explainability, and accountability as core leadership functions.

The third main category was **ethical and relational leadership in AI-mediated organizations**. Participants emphasized that AI adoption can weaken trust if employees experience AI as surveillance, dehumanization, or unfair evaluation. They argued that leaders must protect the human side of organizing by communicating the purpose of AI, involving employees in implementation, and ensuring that AI supports rather than replaces dignity, autonomy, and participation. Ethical leadership was not limited to compliance with regulations; it included empathy, fairness, transparency, and sensitivity to employees’ fears. One participant said, “People do not resist AI only because they fear losing jobs; they resist because they fear becoming invisible behind numbers” (P11). Another stated, “A leader must translate AI into human language. If employees only see dashboards and scores, trust disappears” (P20). This category indicates that relational leadership remains central in AI-enabled organizations, but its expression changes from direct interpersonal influence to the humanization of algorithmic systems.

The fourth main category was **adaptive learning and AI literacy**. Participants believed that future leaders must continuously update their knowledge because AI technologies, business models, and ethical risks change rapidly. AI literacy was defined not as programming expertise but as the ability to understand what AI can and cannot do, ask critical questions, evaluate outputs, and communicate with technical experts. Participants linked AI literacy with adaptive learning, strategic foresight, humility, and experimentation. One participant stated, “Leaders do not need to become data scientists, but they must become intelligent users of data science” (P9). Another participant noted, “In the past, experience was enough for many managers; now experience without learning can become a barrier” (P16). This category suggests that future leadership competence will depend on continuous learning, cognitive flexibility, and the ability to integrate technological understanding with organizational wisdom.

The fifth main category was **distributed leadership through hybrid intelligence systems**. Participants argued that AI changes the location of leadership by distributing influence across leaders, teams, platforms, algorithms, and data infrastructures. In AI-enabled organizations, leadership is no longer concentrated only in formal managerial roles. Employees with data interpretation skills, technical experts who design AI systems, and cross-functional teams that use AI tools may all shape organizational direction. Participants described this as a move from hierarchical command to hybrid intelligence. One participant stated, “Leadership will become less about one person at the top and more about the quality of the intelligence system around decisions” (P2). Another explained, “AI forces leaders to share leadership because no single manager can understand the technology, the market, the ethics, and the people alone” (P21). This category highlights the emergence of distributed, networked, and sociotechnical leadership arrangements.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The first finding showed that artificial intelligence is reshaping leadership through human–AI collaborative decision-making. Participants did not define AI as a simple decision-support tool; rather, they viewed it as an analytical partner that modifies the decision environment itself. This result aligns with Shrestha et al. (2019), who argue that AI changes organizational decision structures by enabling different forms of delegation, sequencing, and aggregation between human and algorithmic judgment. It also supports Raisch and Krakowski's (2021) automation–augmentation paradox, because participants simultaneously recognized AI's capacity to automate managerial analysis and its potential to augment human judgment. Theoretically, this finding suggests that future leadership should be understood as decision orchestration rather than decision ownership. Leaders remain important not because they possess all relevant knowledge, but because they can integrate algorithmic outputs with strategic purpose, contextual interpretation, and moral reasoning. This extends e-leadership theory by moving beyond technology-mediated communication toward technology-mediated cognition (Avolio et al., 2014).

The second finding concerned algorithmic authority and leadership accountability. Participants expressed concern that AI can become a hidden authority system when algorithmic outputs are treated as neutral, objective, or unquestionable. This finding is consistent with research on algorithmic management, which shows that algorithms can restructure control, visibility, and power relations in organizations (Kellogg et al., 2020; Jarrahi et al., 2021). It also corresponds with Faraj et al.'s (2018) argument that learning algorithms involve hidden politics because they classify, predict, and prioritize organizational realities in ways that are not always visible to users. The implication is that leadership accountability must be expanded. In AI-enabled organizations, accountability is not only about the leader's personal intention; it also concerns the leader's responsibility to examine data quality, model assumptions, decision rules, bias risks, and consequences for employees. Future leadership theory should therefore integrate AI governance as a central leadership responsibility rather than treating it as a technical or legal support function.

The third finding showed that ethical and relational leadership remains essential in AI-mediated organizations. Participants believed that AI adoption can damage trust when employees experience it as surveillance, dehumanization, or opaque evaluation. This finding aligns with the emerging literature on responsible AI leadership, which emphasizes the need for technical, adaptive, and transformational capabilities in AI-driven contexts (Hossain et al., 2025). It also supports studies showing that AI-powered leadership involves ethical dilemmas, implementation challenges, and complications in human–AI interaction (Aziz et al., 2025). The result extends transformational and servant leadership perspectives by showing that future leaders must inspire, support, and protect employees not only through interpersonal behavior but also through the design and communication of AI systems. In this sense, ethical leadership becomes sociotechnical: leaders must humanize the use of AI, communicate its purpose, create participatory implementation processes, and ensure that efficiency does not override dignity, fairness, and employee voice.

The fourth finding identified adaptive learning and AI literacy as core leadership capabilities. Participants emphasized that leaders do not need to become technical specialists, but they must understand AI sufficiently to ask critical questions, interpret outputs, and collaborate with experts. This result is consistent with Bevilacqua et al. (2025), who identify AI-driven leadership skills and strategic AI use as central research clusters in the literature on top managers and AI. It also aligns with Benbya et al. (2020), who argue that AI in organizations creates both opportunities and challenges that require managerial understanding of AI typologies, implementation issues, and organizational implications. Theoretically, this finding suggests that leadership competence is becoming more

epistemic and adaptive. Leaders must know how knowledge is produced by AI systems, where its limits lie, and how organizational learning can be sustained under technological uncertainty. Experience alone is insufficient when AI changes the informational basis of leadership.

The fifth finding concerned distributed leadership through hybrid intelligence systems. Participants argued that AI redistributes leadership influence across managers, technical experts, teams, platforms, and data infrastructures. This finding strongly aligns with complexity leadership theory, which conceptualizes leadership as an emergent property of adaptive systems rather than merely the behavior of formal leaders (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). It also corresponds with Van Quaquebeke and Gerpott's (2023) argument that AI may increasingly assume functions traditionally associated with leadership. However, the present findings suggest that full replacement is not the dominant practical expectation among experts; instead, participants anticipated hybridization. Leadership becomes distributed across human and nonhuman elements, but human leaders retain responsibility for meaning, legitimacy, ethical judgment, and strategic direction. This implies that future leadership theory should move from leader-centered models toward sociotechnical leadership systems in which influence emerges from the interaction of people, algorithms, data, and institutional rules.

The findings also suggest that the future of leadership will be shaped by a tension between efficiency and humanity. AI promises faster analysis, improved prediction, personalized feedback, and more consistent decisions. At the same time, it may intensify surveillance, reduce discretion, amplify bias, and weaken trust if implemented without ethical governance. This tension is not peripheral; it is the central theoretical problem of AI-driven leadership. Leaders who treat AI merely as a productivity tool may increase operational performance while damaging legitimacy and employee commitment. Conversely, leaders who reject AI may preserve traditional human-centered practices but lose analytical capacity and strategic agility. The most sustainable pathway is therefore not anti-AI or AI-deterministic leadership, but responsible hybrid leadership.

Overall, the study contributes to leadership theory by proposing that AI-driven leadership is a hybrid sociotechnical capability. This capability includes five interrelated dimensions: collaborative decision orchestration, algorithmic accountability, ethical humanization, adaptive AI literacy, and distributed hybrid intelligence. These dimensions show that future leadership is not only about using AI tools; it is about governing the relationship between human intelligence and artificial intelligence. The leader of the future must be a strategic interpreter, ethical governor, learning architect, and trust builder within AI-enabled organizational systems.

The study has several limitations. First, the participants were selected from Tehran, and their interpretations may reflect the organizational, technological, and institutional conditions of this context. Second, the study relied only on semi-structured interviews; therefore, the findings reflect expert perceptions rather than direct observation of AI-enabled leadership practices. Third, although theoretical saturation was achieved, the sample size was limited to 22 participants. Fourth, the study focused on experts with knowledge of AI and leadership, which may have excluded the perspectives of frontline employees who directly experience algorithmic management and AI-based evaluation systems.

Future research should examine AI-driven leadership across different industries, organizational sizes, and national contexts. Comparative studies could investigate whether leaders in public, private, technology-based, and industrial organizations interpret AI leadership differently. Longitudinal research is also needed to understand how leadership practices change over time as organizations move from early AI adoption to mature AI integration. Future studies could also combine qualitative interviews with organizational case studies, employee surveys, and

document analysis to examine whether leaders' stated approaches to AI are consistent with actual implementation practices.

From a practical perspective, organizations should prepare leaders for AI-enabled environments by developing AI literacy, ethical reasoning, algorithmic accountability, and adaptive learning capabilities. Leadership development programs should not focus only on technical training; they should also include human judgment, trust building, transparency, employee participation, and responsible AI governance. Organizations should create clear accountability mechanisms for AI-supported decisions, involve employees in AI implementation, and ensure that AI systems are explainable, auditable, and aligned with organizational values. Future leaders must learn not only how to use AI, but how to lead responsibly through AI.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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